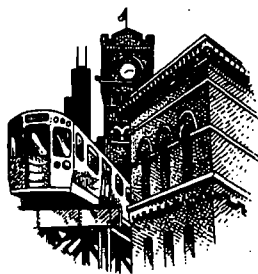


CHICAGO JOURNAL



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Clark and Polk project gets a major rewrite

Concord Homes scraps the town homes and moves the towers, but everybody's happy

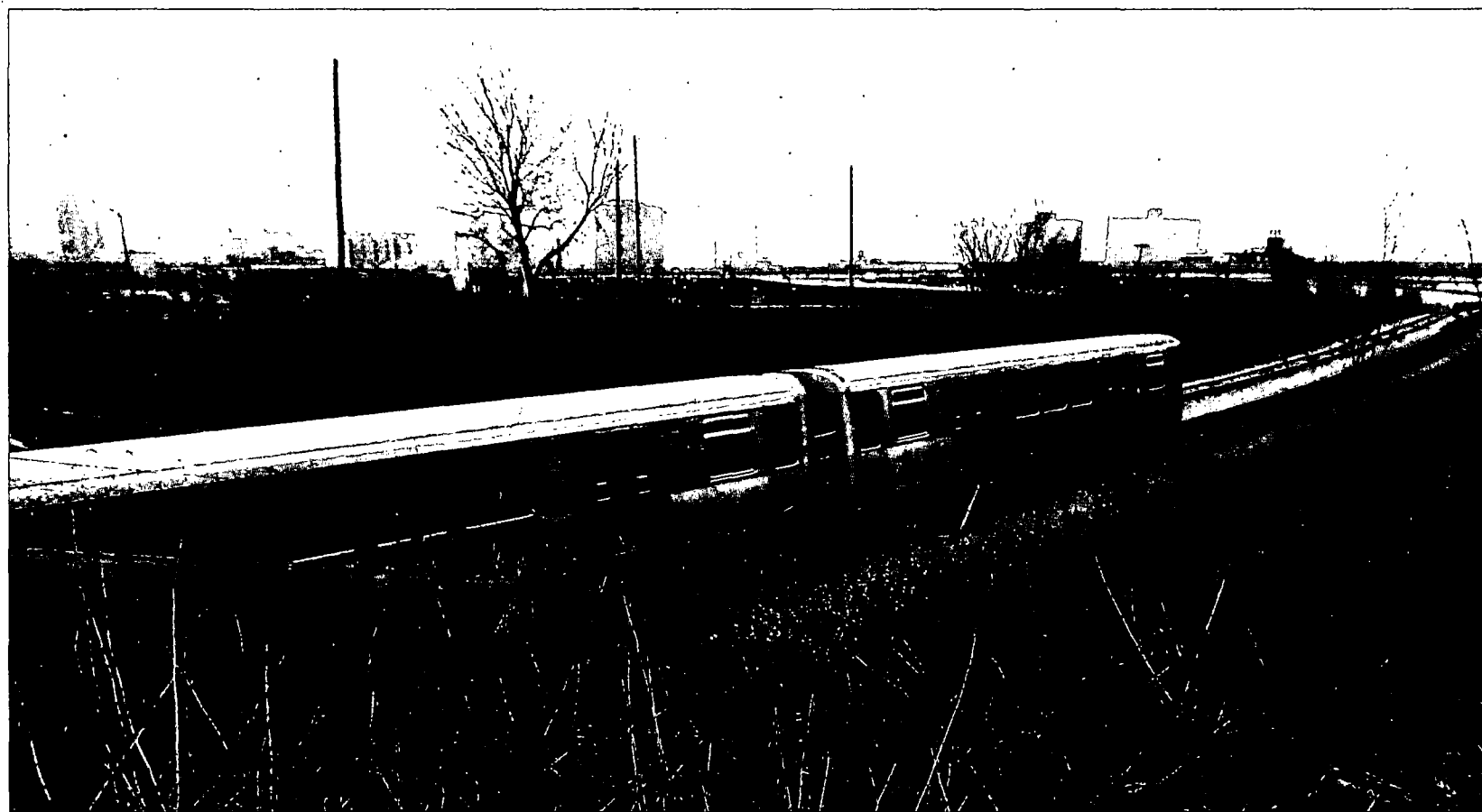
By HAYDN BUSH
Managing Editor

A little more than a year ago, the Concord Homes developers proposing a mix of high-rises and town houses near the southwest corner of Clark and Polk found themselves in the middle of a controversy. While their plans received high marks from the South Loop Neighbors community group, the Department of Planning and Development was less than thrilled with the original site plan, which massed high-rises on the southern end of the development near Ninth Street and placed town homes near Polk Street. Similarly, South Loop Neighbors members said they would be opposed to a reconfigured site plan with the high-rises centered near Clark and Polk, saying that doing so would create an unwelcoming urban canyon that would scare off pedestrians.

A year later, Concord Homes has apparently reconfigured the entire development, and the developers are expected to make two stops at South Loop community forums this week to unveil the new plans. While the developers did not return calls for comment this week, members of both community groups and officials with the DPD indicated that they expect to see revamped plans that would scrap the town homes for three high-rises instead. But

See CONCORD HOMES on Page 5

THE DIARIST



Between Chinatown and the South Loop, an urban vacuum of weeds and graffiti dominates the view from the el.

Photo by Josh Hawkins

Finding the frontier

By MAX BROOKS
Staff Writer

Grapefruits and graffiti, down by the river

In 1991, precocious 18-year-old graffiti writer and hip-hop journalist William "Upski" Wimsatt sketched out an electric, crackling tour of the undeveloped swath of land stretching from Chinatown to Roosevelt Road—the largest vacant plot near downtown Chicago. The essay, titled "The Urban Frontier," was included three years later in his seminal first book, *Bomb the Suburbs*. If you were a Chicago

kid in the mid-1990s and you weren't reading this book, I'm told, you weren't cool.

Fifteen years later, much of the frontier, created during a straightening of the Chicago River in the 1930s, is still vacant. There are plans for 63 acres of condos, boutiques, and more condos, known as Riverside Park, but problems with the Rezmar development team pitching the project have scuttled the

effort for the time being. I thought it would be a good time to take stock of what still remains in this strange pocket of the South Loop, close enough to downtown to hit it with a well-thrown rock.

At the western end of the frontier near the edge of the Chicago River, the 16th Street train bridge rises forlornly into the sky, a much more haunting sculptural testament to Chicago's

coal-covered past than the iron horse Picasso. To the east, there are the Rock Island Metra tracks, the Red Line, and Clark Street. The southern border is a little less clear, but at the time of Upski's writing, it stood, more or less, at Archer Avenue.

For Upski, though, the frontier was more a state of mind than a fixed geographical place.

"The frontier is the kind of place you'd expect to stumble on the planet's umbilical cord ... Entire chain-link fences, chunks of buildings, and

See WILDERNESS on Page 3

Shelter makes way for condos and shops

By MAX BROOKS
Staff Writer

The Chicago Christian Industrial League, closing in on the construction of a new building at Roosevelt and California, is getting ready to vacate its longtime Greektown headquarters and will likely make way for new residential and retail development there.

Right now, the industrial league operates a homeless shelter and other services out of a blocklong collection of buildings in an area bounded by Halsted, Green, Monroe, and

Chicago Christian Industrial League will head to North Lawndale later this year

Adams. According to Chicago Christian Industrial League Executive Director Judy McIntyre, Greek Town Partners LLC will most likely tear down the cluster of converted industrial buildings and replace them with a mixed-use development that will include condos, town houses, and retail

space. The CCIL is expected to leave the West Loop in October.

"The infrastructure was mainly held together with prayers, and there was never any money set aside for big capital improvements," McIntyre said, explaining the group's decision to move and the impending demolition of its facilities.

"[The North Lawndale facility] is going to be beautiful," she added.

According to state records, Greek Town Partners is owned by Harlem Irving Cos., 4104 N. Harlem. Harlem Irving representatives

See GREEKTOWN on Page 2

IN THE JOURNAL

It's always closing time





Photo by Josh Hawkins

Under the shadow of the Loop's skyscrapers, much of Upski's frontier has already been cleaned by the developers planning Riverside Park.

WILDERNESS

Continued from page 1

telephone poles lay strewn about as in the wake of disaster." It's a place, he writes later, where "they don't take Mastercard and they don't take American Express."

The essay is organized as a tour, delivered in the voice of a circus-ring huckster, and I decided the best way to examine how the land has changed over the last decade and a half would be to go along for the ride.

"The next tour begins in five minutes," Upski writes. "The greatest opportunities in the world to explore the unknown, meet amazing people, and become cosmopolitan cost only a CTA token."

Last week, I dutifully dismounted the Red Line at the Cermak/Chinatown stop, turned right at the miniature pagoda on Wentworth Avenue, walked past a parking lot, and soon made my way across Archer Avenue.

I held a copy of the book in front of my eyes: "As you cross Archer Avenue, you have already entered the ghost city: If you see people on this street, your drinking problem is serious."

But I hadn't had a drop to drink for a good 12 hours, and people were everywhere: walking on the sidewalk, driving slowly in German imports, giving me the once-over. The southern tip of Upski's chaotic frontier, as it turns out, has given way to something much more tame, as he feared it would; the

1990s-era Chinatown Square, with cookie-cutter town homes and condos connected by alleyways broad enough for two Escalades to pass one another quietly in the night and concrete walkways that run in cute squiggles instead of straight lines:

As I approached 19th and Wentworth, now an informal parking lot for Chinatown shoppers, a woman in a maroon Passat rolled down her passenger-side window.

"Are you getting out?" she asked, hoping to get my parking space.

"No," I said.

She looked at me quizzically, as if to say "then where the hell are you going?" and found a space a few spots up. I waved nonchalantly as I passed. Crossing 18th Street, I closed in on what rightly could be considered the remaining frontier. There, Wentworth Avenue turns to dirt and then dead-ends. An improvised, diamond-shaped soccer and softball field is stamped out of the tall, snarled grass and mud to the left, but within 50 yards or so, I cleared that as well. As if on cue, I soon saw tumbleweed rolling desolately across the mess of mud and prairie grass. At the Metra tracks near 16th Street, I spotted a unmanned yellow Metra truck. I'd

when I felt the sense of adventure Upski wrote about—the chance to meet fellow travelers, kindred lost souls, and dangerous encounters. Ahead, beside a potato-sticks-looking pile of old, tarred railroad ties, black smoke rose from a campfire burning unwatched, surrounded by a ring of uneaten grapefruits. I looked cautiously for the fire keepers, aware that they might not take kindly to an interloper poking around, but there was no one there.

One hundred yards or so beyond 16th Street, the land flattened out and turned to carefully graded dirt, signs of preparation for Riverside Park. Nearby, two helmet-clad engineers were taking sight lines. I waved, hoping they wouldn't call the police, and the man by the tripod waved back. I decided to approach.

The other engineer claimed the first one knew as much as anyone about the frontier. I asked if they'd noticed the campfire.

They had: "Yeah. We were thinking of stringing up some chickens, or maybe a coyote," the

there, they might not realize that the "Bomb" in the title was a slang term for graffiti writing. I quickly stuffed the book in my backpack.

After doubling back and walking along a concrete walkway that runs near the river for a good way, I reached the next major point of interest: the daunting, upraised rail bridge crossing the Chicago River near 18th Street. Intrepid graffiti writers have managed to leave their mark on the very top of the scaffolding, though climbing it was not a feat I dared attempt. Instead, I passed under the bridge along the bank—two more tarp encampments stood nearby—and walked by a metal canoe that someone had stashed there for summer recreation.

As I crossed under the tracks again, I was met by a splash of color. There were literally hundreds of spent aerosol cans and paint buckets there, alongside the other offal graffiti writers leave behind. Surprisingly, plastic bottles of grape, orange, and fruit punch soda outnumbered beer bottles 10 to 1. On the pylons, intricate graffiti pieces, up to 30 feet across, covered the concrete, mostly free of the simple tags and throw-ups that mar many storefronts. Even the most hardened, graffiti-hating neighborhood advocate would have to admit their ingenuity.

On the westernmost pylon, I spotted a well-painted skull with colorful bubbles trailing behind it, marked by a haunting slogan: "Writers never die." Standing there, you could almost believe it. In *Bomb the Suburbs*, Upski quotes a fellow graffiti writer saying when he was in the frontier, he always felt like other graffiti writers were going to

jump out from one of its wall and surround him. Though I've probably never been as far away from other people since moving to the city, I felt the same way, oddly crowded. There's a physical symptom for this feeling: the goose bumps.

From the pylons, it's a quick jaunt back to the frontier's entrance. As I emerged back into civilization where I left it near 18th Street, a group of men playing soccer looked at me as if I'd crawled out of a crypt. It didn't help that my white Keds were caked in a comical amount of mud.

I hadn't done a whole lot—just kicked around for a couple hours, really, running into engineers instead of urban homesteaders. But the remnants of the frontier—the campsite, the graffiti walls, the upraised bridge—were still exhilarating to visit, in a way that Riverside Park, or whatever replaces it, will likely not be.

"You haven't even gotten to the frontier yet, and already it's shrinking," Upski wrote sullenly at the beginning of his tour, referencing the now-completed plans for the northern extension of Chinatown. As I made my way back to Wentworth Avenue, I briefly felt the same heaviness.

But perhaps this was a little



Photo by Josh Hawkins

Intricate graffiti covers a concrete pylon holding up a railroad bridge over the Chicago River.

shorter one said, mostly kidding.

Did anybody live on the frontier, I asked?

He pointed me in the direction of "the condo," an impressive construction of chain-link fences and blue and black tarp near the Roosevelt Street overpass and the Metra tracks. No one was home when I got up the courage to visit a few days later, but I estimated it to be about 300-square-feet in total, significantly larger than your average room in a transient hotel.

The engineer then gestured to the railroad bridge for the St. Charles Line, and said I might run into someone there wearing the same coat they had on, a parka with the logo of his engineering company. They'd given it to the man who was there a year ago on a cold Christmas Eve.

I asked if any of the squatters were dangerous.

"No," the same engineer said. But as he gave me directions to the paved path running along the frontier's west end, he soberly cautioned me about a wild coyote he'd seen there several times. As I headed off, he waved goodbye.

"Good luck," he said cheerfully. "If not, we'll find you next week."

I headed west to get a glimpse of the condo. but for the time being,



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Still, as I stepped over the railroad ties, I got the eerie feeling that I'd clearly crossed over to the wrong side of the tracks. The trees were short and sickly, and some bits of tarp and wet blanket around a fire ring indicated that I'd likely stepped into someone else's home, even if no one was there.

Below the Metra tracks, there was a relatively dry gravel road that allowed me to proceed north unperturbed, visible only to curious condo owners living along Clark and keen-eyed dog walkers on Roosevelt. I hadn't been on the road very long

ing pile of old, tarred railroad ties, black smoke rose from a campfire burning unwatched, surrounded by a ring of uneaten grapefruits. I looked cautiously for the fire keepers, aware that they might not take kindly to an interloper poking around, but there was no one there.

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But perhaps this was a little silly. People moving back into the heart of the city, after all, is a good thing.

And, as Upski notes, there are other frontiers in Chicago. A frontier, he writes, can be anywhere that "train tracks, water, factories, parks, rooftops—or just plain neglect—conspire to create secret places in the city." For instance, the view out of a Green Line train, over the sooty factory tops and neglected boulevards of the West Side, suggests there's more adventure to be had by intrepid youngsters who grow up long after the South Loop "frontier" is developed. They'll only have to follow the old frontiersman's credo: Go west, young man.



Photo by Josh Hawkins

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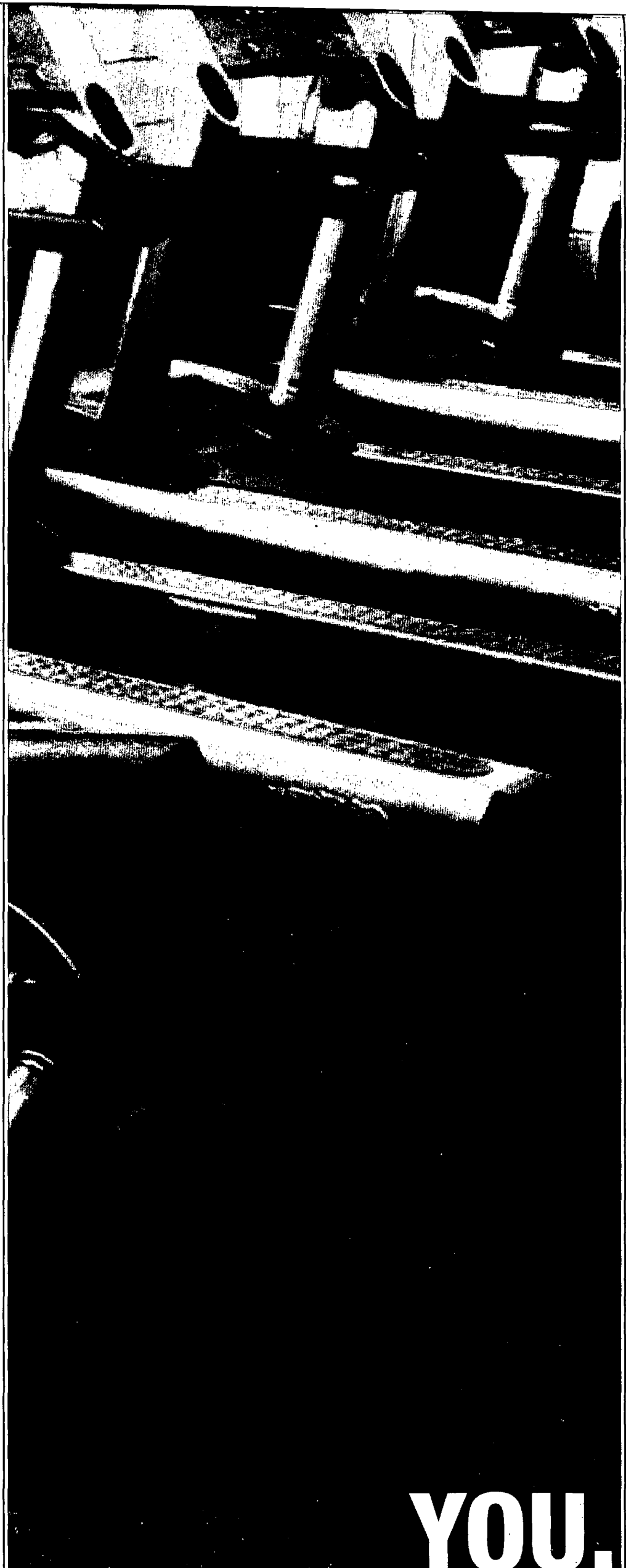
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"Good luck," he said cheerfully. "If not, we'll find you next week."

I headed west to get a glimpse of the condo, but, for the time being, I thought better of approaching alone and perhaps surprising its tenant. Upski wrote about one frontier homesteader, a man named Shane, who pulled a knife on him when taken unawares, and though Upski came out of the scrape all right and got to know Shane better, I didn't want to rush into things.

As I passed the condo and approached the Metra track, I was amazed that I still hadn't been warned off by a railroad company thickneck. At the same time, I became acutely aware that the book I was holding in my hands had "bomb" splashed across it in big letters. If the wrong cop, FBI agent or Department of Homeland Security officer did find me out



chicago park district

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